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2009

## An enigma: barriers to the identification of gifted students with a learning disability

Catherine Wormald

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**An Enigma: Barriers to the Identification of Gifted Students with**  
**a Learning Disability**

**An Enigma: Barriers to the Identification of Gifted Students with  
a Learning Disability**

*Catherine Wormald, Diploma of Teaching (Secondary Maths) WIE, Graduate  
Certificate in Education (Gifted Education) CSU, M.Ed. UWS.*

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Wollongong

Faculty of Education

2009

## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

This thesis reported the original work of the author, except as stated.  
It has not been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other university.

Catherine Wormald  
November 2009

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother without whose personality traits I would not have survived, and to my husband for his faith in me and his love.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research was to understand the barriers to the identification of gifted students with a learning disability. Gifted students with a learning disability are an enigma within schools and are underrepresented in programs for gifted students. The benefits to students, families and teachers of appropriate programs for gifted students with a learning disability have been well documented.

This study employed a mixed method of research and consisted of two phases which ran concurrently. In Phase 1 teachers from New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DET) schools, Sydney Catholic Education Office (CEO) schools in a metropolitan Sydney School Education Area, and an independent Kindergarten to Year 12 school were surveyed using the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP). The schools included selective high schools, schools with opportunity classes as well as mainstream classes, comprehensive high schools and mainstream primary schools. A number of teachers were also interviewed.

In Phase 2 multiple case studies were undertaken. The participants consisted of students who were identified as gifted with a learning disability, their families and willing professionals they had consulted. Documents, results from various assessments and intervention programs, as well as reports from school counsellors, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, paediatricians and other educational consultants were provided and analysed. Students and their families were then interviewed.

The results of the research showed that teachers have knowledge of, and a positive attitude towards gifted students but are ambivalent towards students with other special needs. Teachers also demonstrated substantial confusion and conflict about their understanding of gifted students, their educational needs and their responsibility to these students and also students with special needs. There was virtually no understanding of gifted students with a learning disability.



The results indicated that identification of these students is occurring through the efforts of the parents and that there is minimal recognition and support from the schools. All the students have had negative experiences with respect to their schooling.

Finally it was recommended that an identification protocol be established in schools based on the information provided by the parents of the participants in this study. In addition teachers need to be provided with comprehensive training in this field and support from the decision makers across all sectors of education. Furthermore additional extensive research needs to be undertaken on gifted students with a learning disability. Specific research needs to be completed into the effectiveness of an instrument specifically designed for teachers focused on gifted students with a learning disability in order to assess the effectiveness of an identification protocol and in addition research on the social and emotional issues for these students.

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